A BIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF POLITICS

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THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY'S political commentaries have a special interest and significance because of the position which Huxley occupied in the world of science. He was first of all, a biologist. One of the most prominent exponents of the doctrine of evolution, his life work was devoted mainly to scientific investigations in biology and related sciences.

Although his writings on government are comparatively small in bulk, they constitute a most valuable contribution to the development of modern political theory. He approached the subject with a mind free from inherited prejudice; his point of view was that of an impartial scientist. Sweeping away all fine-spun "a priori" lines of reasoning, and pursuing to their logical result both individualism and "regimentation," he sought to demonstrate the weaknesses inherent in both these great political systems. Finally, while he did not attempt to construct a new system to supplant those which he undermined, he pointed out the way by which a better and more enduring system could be constructed—a system based on the solid ground of biological principles and the history of man's social development through the family group, in the place of the more or less idealistic systems based on speculative reasoning which, in attempting to realize a political Utopia, inflict untold mischief upon society.

Huxley finds in the philosophy of government three fundamental problems, as follows:

(a) In whom is the sovereign authority properly vested?

(b) By what machinery should that authority be exercised?

(c) In respect of what matters is its exercise legitimate?

The first two questions Huxley considers of subordinate importance. The one in which he is chiefly interested is the third; that is, the relationship between the rights of the individual and the powers of the State. This, he declares, is the great problem—so great, indeed, that it "completely overshadows the others." In other

words the question is not so much who the person or persons are in whom the government is vested, or by what methods they function, as it is, how far the government has a right to encroach upon the liberty of the individual. In short, he says: "The great problem of political philosophy is to determine the province of government. Is there, or is there not, any region of human action over which the individual himself alone has jurisdiction and into which other men have no business to intrude?" Today that is a question upon which the world seems to be at sea more than at any time in the past.

Huxley begins by tracing the history of the State from the days of Greece and Rome, showing how the authority of the government was almost universal in scope, nothing in human life, practically, being exempt from the intrusion of the State, save private religious practices, the cult of the Lares and Penates. Outside the domestic circle, indeed, even religious liberty stopped. All citizens in the States of antiquity were required to pay homage to the State deities. Contempt of the official gods was severely punished; sometimes, as in the case of Socrates, by the death penalty, though so long as the "infidel" kept quiet he was not likely to be molested.

Religion, consequently, was an integral part of government, and a man could not be a 100 per cent (to use the current silly phrase) citizen unless he were loyal, or at least professed to be loyal, to the national gods. Hence it was, Huxley says, that Christianity got into trouble with the pagan State. Christianity, with its universality and its ideas of human brotherhood transcending national or ethnic boundaries, seemed to be destructive of the very existence of the State and of the established political and economic order. He declares that the Christian Church was the "International" (or, as he might say today if he were still living, the Third International) of the pagan political world.

Huxley point out, too, that while Christianity is supposed to have supplanted paganism in toto, as a matter of fact it took over many of the elements of the pagan State into its own organization, the resulting product being the Mediaeval Church. In fact, he doubts whether "the vanquished did not in effect subdue the victor."

One of the doctrines of the pagan State which Christianity took over, according to Huxley, was the union of Church and State: that is, the establishment of religion, making its protection and support, as well as the punishment of offenses against it a part of the function of the State. So deeply intrenched did the belief become that there was a necessary connection between the State and the Church, and

that the authority of the State consequently extended over men's beliefs as well as over their actions, that even the Protestant reformers, he says, "held firmly by this precious heirloom of the ages of faith, whatever other shards of ecclesiastical corruption they might cast aside."

It was the breakup of Protestantism into quarreling sects and the consequent inability to determine just what beliefs were orthodox and what were not, that finally began to weaken the doctrine of the duty of the State to enforce religious conformity. The doctrine, however, died hard. As late as 1611, four years after the colonization of Virginia, a heretic, one Bartholomew Legate, was burnt at the stake in Protestant England, following a trial conducted by King James in person. Professor Bury tells the story in his *History of Freedom of Thought* (1912). Under close questioning, Legate admitted that he had not prayed to Jesus for a space of some seven years. "Away, base fellow," cried James spurning him with his foot, "who in seven years together hath not prayed to Our Savior." He was speedily convicted and consigned to the flames.

Speaking of the same enlightened monarch, Lecky, in his *Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe*, says: "Soon after his accession to the throne, a law was enacted which subjected witches to death on the first conviction, even though they should have inflicted no injury upon their neighbors. This law was passed when Coke was Attorney-General and Bacon a member of Parliament."

But to return to Huxley: it was not until 1869, he says, when John Locke published his famous *Treatise on Government*, that any "systematic inquiry" was made into the "proper limits of governmental action in general."

He goes on to show the connection between Locke's epoch-making *Treatise on Government,* and the Engish revolution, following the expulsion of James II, by which Liberalism triumphed over Absolutism. Locke based his system on the "social contract" theory. In this he followed in the footsteps of Hobbes. In the state of nature, as assumed by Hobbes, all men were equal and each man strove for the enjoyment to the full of all his "natural rights," thus bringing about a state of war of each against all. This condition proving intolerable, Hobbes assumed in the second place that, in order to secure the blessings of peace and order, men voluntarily entered into a contract with each other, surrendering all of their "natural rights" to the person or persons in whom sovereignty was vested. Men having thus made a complete surrender of their "natural

rights" to the sovereign in return for peace and protection, the authority of the sovereign was absolute and the individual member of the commonwealth possessed no "natural rights" of his own at all, having only such rights as the sovereign chose to turn back to him. In other words, civil law, guaranteed by the whole force of the community, superseded "natural rights" which were backed only by the force of each individual. Huxley pictures Hobbes' ideal of the State as "a sternly disciplined regiment, in which the citizens are privates, the State functionaries officers, and every action in life is regulated and settled by the sovereign's regulations and instructions."

Now Locke accepted the idea of a primitive "state of nature," and the origin of government through "social contract." However, he attacks Hobbes' theory of the total surrender of "natural rights." According to Locke, only a very limited surrender of natural rights took place. This difference, says Huxley, marks the divergence of the two great systems of political philosophy which have been current down to our own day, one line of reasoning finding its ultimate expression in anarchy and the other in State socialism. In their less extreme form, one is individualism and the other the system which he describes by the word *regimentation.*

Huxley sketches for us the history of *regimentation,* which was first preached in France by Morelly and Mably and reached its culmination in Rousseau's *Essay on the Social Contract.* Rousseau laid down the proposition that the social contract is "the foundation of all rights," that the sovereign is the totality of the citizens, and that each individual, in assenting to the social contract, gives himself and all he possesses to the sovereign, the individual losing all his natural liberty and the State becoming master of him and of his goods. In return the citizen receives from the State civil liberty and a guarantee of his right to possession of such property as the State may allow him to hold.

In Rousseau's State, it appears that the sovereignty itself "means nothing more nor less than the omnipotence of a bare majority of voices of all the members of the State collected together in general meetings." Rousseau further assumes, as he tells us in Book II, Chap. 3, that "the general will is always upright and always tends towards the general good." The true end of legislation, according to Rousseau, is the greatest good of all, and this embraces two elements, namely, liberty and equality. It appears, however, that liberty is merely "obedience to the law which one has laid down for

himself." Huxley confesses that this definition of liberty is a little difficult for him to swallow. "To my mind," he says, "it is somewhat hard to reconcile with the obligation to submit to laws laid down by other people who happen to be in a majority." As to equality, Rousseau does not insist that "absolute equality of power and wealth" must be established, but that "neither opulence nor beggary is to be permitted," and that the legislature shall have the right to decide the nature of the business in which the community shall engage, whether agricultural, manufacturing, or commerce, which means that the State shall have the power to control distribution as well as production.

In Rousseau's system, also, the sovereign people shall establish a State religion, but this State religion is not to be based on theological dogma but on "sentiments of sociability," and heretics are to be punished not for impiety but for "unsociability"!

In ultimate analysis, Rousseau's system is based on the theory of Hobbes; i. e., the omnipotence of the State, resulting from the complete surrender of natural rights in the social contract. Rousseau's political doctrines were at the bottom of the creed of Robespierre and St. Just, who tried to put them into effect in the French Revolution. "In their methods of endeavoring, by the help of the guillotine," says Huxley, "to force men to be free, they supplied the works naturally brought forth by the Rousseauite faith. And still more were they obedient to the master in insisting on a State religion and in certifying the existence of God by a governmental decree."

In fact, by going clear back to Morelly and Mably, Huxley says that he finds just as ably stated as by socialistic writers of the nineteenth century the leading doctrines of modern socialism, namely, that all economic and political ills would be cured if the State directed production and regulated consumption, and that "love of approbation" would be as adequate a stimulus to industry as the desire for private wealth and individual power.

Huxley then traces the history of individualism. Political individualism, as held by its more moderate supporters today, goes back to John Locke. Although both Hobbes and Locke, as already indicated, assumed a primitive "state of nature," in Hobbes' "state of nature" men were lawless and ferocious savages while according to Locke's theory they were "highly intelligent and respectable persons." Locke represents his primitive men, in fact, as "living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth

with authority to judge between them." (Civil Government, Chap. 19.) Hobbes' primitive men gave up all their natural rights because they were not fit to retain any of them, whereas Locke's primitive men surrendered to the State only a limited portion of their natural rights. In fact, it was only because backsliders who failed "to maintain the original standard of ethical elevation that those inconveniences arose which drove the rest to combine into commonwealths."

But it must be noted that it was only a very limited grant of authority that was given to the State. Locke, Huxley infers, had to be very specific on this point, because with the Stuart pretender recognized by France, and with a powerful "Divine Right" Jacobite faction watching for a chance to restore the absolute monarchy in England, Locke was under the necessity of insisting very strongly upon the strictly limited character of the surrender of natural rights by primitive man in the social contract. Therefore, he takes great pains to prove that the power of the sovereign is limited to the performance of functions necessary "to secure every one's property," and similar police duties.

Huxley here introduces an amusing reference to Darwinism by humorously imagining that Locke's primitive men, having called a general meeting, "to consider the defects of their condition, and somebody being voted to the tree (in the presumable absence of chairs), this earliest example of a constituent assembly resolved to form a governmental company, with strictly limited liability, for the purpose of defending liberty and property."

Locke's theories were taken up enthusiastically by the Physiocrats of the eighteenth century, because they saw in his system a relief from the excess of government which the elder Mirabeau described as "the worst malady of modern States," a diagnosis which after the lapse of nearly two centuries is strikingly applicable to all the so-called Great Powers today, and to none more so than to the United States.

It was the Physiocrats who coined the phrase, "laissez faire," which was merely the application of political individualism to economics. In a nutshell, the "laissez faire" philosophy postulated the right of every man "to do as he pleases so long as he does no harm to others," or, in other words, "the freedom of man to do anything he pleases so long as he does not interfere with the same freedom in others." This rule, said Daire, in his "Physiocrates," is "a law of nature." The Physiocrats professed to believe in human equality,

but considered that the function of government was to protect liberty and property, holding that "private property and the right to deal freely with it are essential to the protection of the weak against the strong." Here we have the deadlock between the individualist and the socialist, the latter holding just as firmly to the belief that "private property and freedom of contract involve the tyranny of the strong over the weak."

Just as Rousseau's *Social Contract* is the bible of regimentation, so Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, became the Scripture of individualism and through it the doctrine of "laissez faire" was given tremendous prestige. Free trade and industrial prosperity, says Huxley, tended to strengthen individualism, and so Liberalism came to regard laissez faire—to let alone—as "a definition of the whole duty of the statesman."

Huxley goes on to consider the treatise written by Humboldt in 1791, but not published until 1852, the purpose of which was to prove that the "legitimate functions of the State are negative," and that "governments have no right to take any positive steps for the promotion of the welfare of the individual." Humboldt would, in short, reduce the functions of the State to police duties and protection against foreign enemies. He would exclude all matters of religion, morals, and even of education and the relation of the sexes from the jurisdiction of the State.

It remained, however, for Dunoyer, in his *Liberté du Travail*, the successive volumes of which were published in the years between 1825 and 1845, to set forth the most complete exposition of individualism. In the latter year, also, appeared Stirner's *The Individual and His Property*, in which the author makes a clean sweep of everything and advocates absolutely unlimited individualism. This says Huxley, amounts to sheer anarchy. According to Stirner, natural right is simply natural might, certain men having entered into society merely for self-interest, thinking they could get more for themselves by that means; the struggle for existence is just as bitter as ever, the only sanction to laws is the will of the majority and the majority may be as brutal as an individual despot. As Huxley sees it, there is practically no difference between this teaching and the doctrines of avowed anarchists like Bakounine, who maintain that whether a man shall recognize the rights of others is a matter to be left to his private judgment, that "all property is robbery," and that "all government from without is tyranny."

Huxley next discusses the doctrines of Auberon Herbert and the "party of individual liberty," which he classifies as purely anarchist in nature, because Herbert would "do away with all enforced taxation and levying of duties, and trust to voluntary payments for the revenue of the State." This thinker would likewise throw overboard State education, State regulation of marriage, State supported libraries, museums, parks and the like. The functions of the State, in Herbert's view, should be confined to "the administration of civil and criminal justice," and it is only with hesitation and uncertainty that he grants even this amount of authority to the State because, in his opinion, even the smallest amount of governmental interference is at best only "justifiable usurpation." Huxley ridicules the phrase "justifiable usurpation," asserting that it is a contradiction of terms.

By these illustrations, Huxley seeks to show that "individualism, pushed to its logical extreme, must end in philosophical anarchy," and quotes Donisthorpe's work entitled *Individualism, A System of Politics* (1889), in proof.

Recapitulating, we see that, from the point of view of the individualist, the function of government is negative, its business being "to interfere only for the purpose of preventing any one citizen from using his liberty in such a way as to interfere with the equal liberty of another citizen." From the point of view of the regimentalist, on the other hand, the business of government is both negative and "eminently positive," in that it is the function of the State "to interfere for the purpose of promoting the welfare of society, . . . however much such interference may restrict individual liberty." And as already pointed out, individualism, pushed to its mercilessly logical extreme, ends in anarchy, while regimentation ends in socialism.

Granting the premisses upon which these political theories rest, Huxley declares that he is "unable to see that one of these lines of argument is any better than the other; they are mutually destructive."

The weakness of both these theories, thinks Huxley, lies in the fallacy of their starting points, namely, "natural rights," the original "equality of man," and "the social contract." Huxley feels so strongly on these topics that he has written a separate essay in which he discusses them at much length. This work is entitled *Natural and Political Rights*. Here we see very clearly the influence of Huxley the biologist upon Huxley the political philosopher. For

instance, he vigorously contests Rousseau's famous dictum (transplanted into our own Declaration of Independence) that "all men are created equal."

"Rousseau," he says, "like the sentimental rhetorician that he was, and half, or more than half, sham, as all sentimental rhetoricians are, sagaciously fought shy, as we have seen, of the question of the influence of natural upon political equality. But those of us who do not care for sentiment, and do care for truth, may not evade the consideration of that which is the real key of the puzzle.

"If Rousseau, instead of letting his children go to the foundling asylum, had taken the trouble to discharge a father's duties towards them, he would hardly have talked so fast about men being born equal, even in a political sense. For, if that merely means that all newborn children are political zeros—it is as we have seen, though true enough, nothing to the purpose; while, if it means that, in their potentiality of becoming factors in any social organization—citizens in Rousseau's sense—all men are born equal, it is probably the most astounding falsehood that ever was put forth by a political speculator, and that, as all students of political speculation will agree, is saying a good deal for it.

"In fact, nothing is more remarkable than the wide inequality which children, even of the same family, exhibit as soon as mental and moral qualities begin to manifest themselves which is earlier than most people fancy. Every family spontaneously becomes a polity. Among the children, there are some who continue to be 'more honored and more powerful than the rest, and to make themselves obeyed' (sometimes, indeed, by their elders) in virtue of nothing but their moral and mental qualities. Here 'political inequality' visibly dogs the heels of 'natural inequality.' The group of children becomes a political body, a civitas, with its rights of property and its practical distinctions of rank and power. And all this comes about neither by force nor by fraud, but as the necessary consequence of the innate inequalities of capability."

Addressing his attention to the venerable doctrine of "natural rights," Huxley is no less outspoken:

"Probably none of the political delusions which have sprung from the 'natural rights' doctrine," he assures us, "has been more mischievous than the assertion that all men have a natural right to freedom, and that those who willingly submit to any restriction of this freedom, beyond the point determined by the dictates of the *a priori* philosophers, deserve the title of slaves."

This delusion, he tells us, is "the result of the error of confounding natural with moral rights." He declares that there can be, in fact, no form of association compatible with the theory of "natural rights," because "natural rights" simply means unrestricted warfare: "Natural rights," furthermore, cannot be monopolized by man.

From this point of view of nature, a tiger, he says, has just as much "natural right" to kill and eat a man, in obedience to its innate instincts, as a man has to hunt and kill the tiger.

In the same way, Huxley attacks the social contract theory. He says: "There is just as little foundation in fact for the social contract, and either the limited or the unlimited devolution of rights and powers which is supposed to have been effected by it."

In support of his contention, he maintains that the earliest polity was the patriarchal family, and scoffs at the idea of a "social contract" entered into between the father and the wife and children, "arising out of an expressed desire of the latter to have their liberty and property protected by their governor." He denies that there ever was even a "tacit understanding" on the subject, and declares that the more primitive the group, the more improbable that any such contract or understanding existed. In fact, there was no need of such a contract, because the wife and children didn't possess any liberty or property. The "pater familias" of the primitive Aryan group was an absolute monarch, with power of life and death over the members of the family, and the primitive State, if such there might have been, was probably a sort of federation of these little family monarchies, "the chief purpose of which was the maintenance of an established church for the worship of the family ancestors." "Archaic society," he points out, "aims not at the freest possible exercise of rights, but at the exactest possible discharge of duties," and among these duties, in such a group the propitiation of the ancestral gods was by far the most important.

Although Huxley thus, as he admits, throws "out of court" both of these political theories, because they are "built upon the quicksand of fictitious history," he is extremely dissatisfied with the present state of society. He says:

"Even the best of modern civilization appears to me to exhibit a condition of mankind which neither embodies any worthy ideal nor even possesses the merit of stability. I do not hesitate to express the opinion that, if there is no hope of a large improvement of the condition of the greater part of the human family; if it is true that the increase of knowledge, the winning of greater dominion over nature which is its consequence, and the wealth which follows upon that dominion, are to make no difference in the extent and the intensity of Want, with its concomitant physical and moral degradation, among the masses of the people, I should hail the advent of some kindly comet, which would sweep the whole affair away, as a desirable consummation.

"What profits it to the human Prometheus that he has stolen the fire of heaven to be his servant, and that the spirits of the earth and of the air obey him, if the vulture of pauperism is eternally to tear his very vitals and keep him on the brink of destruction?"

What profits it indeed? It is a question that is being repeated with greater and greater insistence everywhere today.

Huxley now proceeds to draw an analogy from the government of the family group, and shows how too strict rule and no rule at all in the family are alike destructive in their effects. Coming, then, to "the aggregation of families which constitutes the State," he finds that the same rule substantially applies. The problem of government, he says, is "what ought to be done and what be left undone by society, as a whole, in order to bring about as much welfare of its members as is compatible with the natural order of things."

Now, he goes on to argue, the fact must be faced, that the natural order tends to inequality; that is, "to the maintenance, in one shape or another, of the war of each against all." Here we see the influence of "the struggle for existence" in Huxley's political reasoning. We see also that the Malthusian law is present in his mind, for he says: "The pressure of a constant increase of population upon the means of support must keep up the struggle for existence, whatever form of social organization may be adopted." This alone, he believes, would soon bring to a crisis any system of society based either upon laissez faire individualism or upon State socialism.

After all—and here it is Huxley the Biologist speaking the final word—"the political problem of problems is how to deal with over-population." He traces over-population to two sources—internal by generation and external by immigration. Theoretically, he believes, want and misery could be eliminated by arresting over-population at both sources and keeping the manufacturing, commercial, and professional population down to a prescribed minimum, so that the production of society will be adequate to the reasonable wants of the population. This is the plan advocated by Fichte in *The Closed Industrial State*, and Huxley confesses that he knows of no other social arrangement likely to bring about this result. In any event, he warns political speculators who, like Rousseau, indulge in visions of a "millenium of equality and fraternity," that they must not lose sight of the biological factors, for, by so doing, they are "reckoning sadly without their host or rather hostess, Dame Nature."